

Caswell Developmental Center

A Brief History

Dr. Ira May Hardy, a LaGrange native, had a child with intellectual disabilities in his own family. Realizing the need for a facility that would serve his daughter, he presented a concept paper for a “school for the feeble minded” to the Seaboard Medical Society. With the support of the medical community, and through his vigorous lobbying, he moved the NC General Assembly to authorize the school on March 4, 1911. At that time, Kinston and Lenoir County offered state officials 807 acres to create the campus. The cornerstone of the first building was laid on May 6, 1912. That building still stands in the center of campus. It was named in honor of Dr. Hardy, who served as the first superintendent of the North Carolina School for the Feebleminded.

A new superintendent, Dr. C. Banks McNairy of Lenoir, was at the helm on July 1, 1914 when 15 young women became the first admissions. Those first residents lived in a farm house (now called the Stroud House). In less than a year, the school had 120 residents, 65 of them boys. Most of those first residents helped with housework or worked on the farm. The first young residents were given two and one-half hours of schooling each day, followed by “manual and industrial training” through their jobs around the school.

In 1915, Dr. McNairy convinced the legislature to change the name of the facility to Caswell Training School. The name Caswell honors Revolutionary War leader Richard Caswell who lived in Lenoir County and served as the first governor of North Carolina.

During the early days, the Center operated on a shoestring budget. When both dormitories burned in the winter of 1918, residents were sent home, others were sent to Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh, and there was some question whether the school would survive. With an appropriation and a bond, new buildings were built. The school had a list of residents waiting to move in. Because medical research into the causes of intellectual disabilities was in its infancy, many people who would not be considered for admission today were admitted. Unwed mothers, juvenile offenders, persons with multiple handicapping conditions, and children with mental retardation, slept side by side in massive dormitories filled to overflowing with cots. Caswell’s census reached 2,000 before other state facilities were opened to serve people with intellectual disabilities in Goldsboro, Butner, Morganton and Black Mountain.

The word “training” was dropped from the school name in 1959 to distinguish Caswell from state schools for delinquent youth. The facility was renamed Caswell Center in 1963 and Caswell Developmental Center in 2008.

Caswell Developmental Center maintains certification from the federal Intermediate Care Facility for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICF/IID) Medicaid program. Caswell Developmental Center continues to develop and streamline its services and programs to meet the ever-changing needs of its service recipients.

Today, Caswell Developmental Center, the state’s oldest residential facility serving people with intellectual disabilities, serves citizens in a 38-county region of eastern North Carolina. It is an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services in the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services. It is proud to have served the citizens of North Carolina for over 100 years.